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SUBSTANTIVE QUESTIONS

United Nations information centres in 1995: allocation of resources from the regular budget of the United Nations

Report of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. In a world of rapid political and technological change, and with the new directions and functions being given the Organization by its Member States, public information activities cannot be confined merely to the dissemination of relevant information. The Secretary-General has requested the Department of Public Information and the United Nations information centres to develop innovative and proactive ways to reach out to the public with the evolving message of the United Nations. The information centres' response to this challenge was evident in a wide range of activities planned and implemented, often with local partners, in connection with the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations in 1995.

2. Throughout the anniversary year, the global network of information centres made maximum use of the unique opportunity presented by the occasion to intensify promotional activities in support of the major issues of international concern. In the process, information centres reached out more actively than ever to youth by translating and disseminating UN50 Educational Kits, organizing essay competitions and assisting in the holding of Model United Nations sessions.

3. Feedback from the global network of information centres is testament to the growing role of civil society in the national and international arena, the desire of many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to be active partners in political decision-making and a general emphasis on public debate and airing of

views in search of solutions to the challenges that lie ahead for the international community. Information centres continue to work closely with media representatives while collaborating more closely with government ministries, a growing number of non-governmental organizations, the business and legal communities, academic institutions, think-tanks and research institutes.

4. In paragraph 11 of its resolution 50/31 B of 6 December 1995, the General Assembly took note of the report of the Secretary-General regarding the allocation of resources to United Nations information centres in 1994 and called upon him "to continue to study ways and means to rationalize and effect equitable disbursement of available resources to all United Nations information centres and to report thereon to the Committee on Information at its eighteenth session".

5. In paragraph 9 of the same resolution, relating to the integration of United Nations information centres with field offices of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the General Assembly invited "the Secretary-General to continue the integration exercise whenever feasible, on a case-by-case basis, while taking into account the views of the host country, and ensuring that the information functions and authority of the United Nations information centres are not adversely affected, and to report to the Committee on Information".

6. The present report is submitted to the Committee on Information in response to the above requests of the General Assembly. It includes information on the work of the information centres during 1995; the status of the integration exercise; ongoing efforts to strengthen the information centres; and the financial resources available to the operation of the centres.

7. The report reflects the work programmes of the 62 information centres that were operational during 1995 as well as the increasing public information activities of United Nations offices established under General Assembly resolution 48/209 of 21 December 1993. It does not include United Nations information services in Geneva and Vienna, whose budgetary allocations are separately identified under section 24, Public information, of the programme budget for the biennium 1994-1995; nor does it deal with the information services of the four regional commissions other than the Economic Commission for Europe, which operate within the administrative and budgetary mandates of each commission.

II. FUNCTIONS PERFORMED BY INFORMATION CENTRES

8. In paragraph 8 of its resolution 50/31 B, the General Assembly reaffirmed "the importance attached by Member States to the role of United Nations information centres in effectively and comprehensively disseminating information, particularly in developing countries and countries in transition, about United Nations activities". In this context, the General Assembly, in section III, paragraph 49, of its resolution 50/214 of 23 December 1995, requested "the Secretary-General to continue to provide adequate resources for that purpose".

9. The year 1995 was marked by an extraordinary level of activities carried out by the information centres, as they responded successfully to the challenge posed by two major United Nations conferences and the fiftieth anniversary of the Organization.

10. Having made significant contributions in publicizing the major United Nations conferences in recent years, the information centres again played a crucial role in 1995 in promoting the themes of the World Summit for Social Development and the Fourth World Conference on Women (see A/AC.198/1995/2).

11. Both prior to the Fourth World Conference on Women and as a follow-up, information centres translated the conference backgrounders, declarations and other key documentation into local languages and engaged in a broad range of promotional activities, including briefings and seminars, speaking engagements to reach out to diverse groups, publishing feature articles and providing informational assistance to the local mass media. The information centres in London and in New Delhi provided full support to the regional journalists' encounters organized by the Department of Public Information. With resources provided by the Department and the Conference secretariat, a DPI officer assigned as focal point for the Conference from July 1994 through October 1995 produced and disseminated information materials, in Chinese, on the conference issues as well as on the United Nations. During the Conference, information centres relayed to local media press releases and other information received daily from the Conference site in Beijing, responded to queries from the media and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and kept the Conference spokeswoman and Secretariat officials informed of local response through faxed press clippings and other reports. Some 35 information centres shared funds from within the DPI conference budget to extend their outreach programmes. The information centre in Manila, for instance, helped the national commission in the host country set up an information centre for the duration of the Conference, thereby enabling interested non-governmental organizations and the public to closely follow the conference proceedings and hold their own meetings at the same time.

12. The fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations provided the information centres with an unprecedented opportunity to demonstrate their capability and versatility to generate public support for the Organization. The range of activities organized at the initiative of the centres has confirmed their value as an effective mechanism for disseminating information about the United Nations, as sought by the General Assembly. The activities organized or supported by the information centres in observance of the anniversary covered the following areas: educational (local translation of UN50 Teaching Kits, Global Teach-In, United Nations information centres' local products, Model United Nations sessions, essay competitions, conferences and symposia, etc.); publications (books on the United Nations, special editions of information centres newsletters, etc.); joint projects with mass media (special newspaper inserts or sections, radio and TV programmes); and special programmes (exhibitions, galas and concerts, sports events, dedication of public space and facilities in honour of the United Nations, and other events such as a peace march).

13. Throughout the year, directors and information officers actively participated in seminars, forums or in radio and TV programmes; assisted in the issuance of special newspaper inserts or commemorative publications on the work of the United Nations system partners in the respective host countries; and organized special events in cooperation with local non-governmental organizations and with the UN50 National Committees. The number of UN50 National Committees established with the active involvement of information centres exceeded 90. The Department of Public Information is currently cooperating with the World Federation of United Nations Associations in its efforts to convert the UN50 national committees into national United Nations Associations in countries where no such body currently exists.

14. A number of information centres helped launch the UN50 "Passport to the Future" with the objective of interesting youth in United Nations issues. The United Nations Office in Armenia distributed the Passport at a ceremony involving some 15,000 ninth-grade students who pledged active community service. The information centre in Washington worked closely with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the children's educational supplement to publish a special UN50 edition syndicated to 500 newspapers in the United States of America. Essay competitions for students at various levels were organized in a number of countries, including those served by the information centres in Lagos, Lisbon, Port of Spain and Sana'a. Model United Nations sessions were planned or organized with the assistance of the information centres in Athens, Brussels, Bucharest, Buenos Aires, Islamabad, Lagos, Panama, Port of Spain, Santa Fé de Bogotá and Sydney. In addition to the UN50 Educational Kits, local teaching guides or curricula were developed, and briefings for teachers were held, to encourage the teaching of the United Nations, or of specific issues such as human rights, at various levels of instruction. Examples include the information centre in Bucharest which collaborated with a national institute in launching teaching materials on human rights, the information centre in Cairo which assisted in the meeting of an African non-governmental organizations workshop on human rights education, and the information centre in Copenhagen which worked closely with educators on the teaching of development issues. The information centre in Mexico City organized a seminar on United Nations documentation for the benefit of local librarians.

15. A large number of special radio and TV programmes on the history, role and activities of the United Nations were produced with the active involvement of United Nations information centres, including those in Bucharest, Colombo, Dhaka, Islamabad, Lagos, Manila, Ouagadougou, Prague and Santa Fé de Bogotá, and the United Nations Office in Kazakstan. The fiftieth anniversary was a running theme in regularly produced radio and TV programmes in several other countries. In Sri Lanka, the Government Film Unit, with assistance from the information centre in Colombo, produced a documentary in English and Sinhalese on the United Nations in Sri Lanka, which was made available to theatres in the capital. The information centre in Islamabad provided backgrounders, slides and visual materials to Pakistan Television in the production of a series of quiz programmes on United Nations issues for university students. Many United Nations information centres successfully negotiated with the local press and broadcasters to air or print the fiftieth anniversary public service announcements.

16. Examples of other public outreach activities organized or supported by information centres in connection with the UN50 observance were peace marches, including one with the involvement of the information centre in Rome that drew 80,000 people. With the involvement of the information centre in Colombo, the UN50 Mobile Train Exhibit in Sri Lanka carried the message of the United Nations to the people via the railways. The information centre in Nairobi co-organized a "UN Road Show" of performing artists travelling throughout Kenya, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania.

17. Also as part of the UN50 activities, a number of information centres prepared and disseminated information on diskettes. The information centre in Mexico City produced, in Spanish, a "virtual tour" of the United Nations including graphics and a description of the United Nations main organs, while the information centre in Rabat produced a set of four diskettes in French containing historic documents, including the Secretary-General's major policy statements and other information.

18. During the period under review, information centres regularly assisted local media organizations in producing radio and TV programmes on priority issues pegged to the Organization's commemorative days, with directors or information officers appearing as guests or providing background materials. In addition to periodic newsletters, often in bilingual editions, the information centres continued to issue press releases, also in local languages as appropriate, on activities of the Secretary-General, meetings, observances, and events of the United Nations and its agencies.

19. In keeping with the tradition to translate into local languages major documents and publications of the United Nations, the text of the Charter of the United Nations was translated in the course of 1995 into Hausa, Hindi, Igbo, Sinhalese, Tamil, Urdu and Yoruba. The text of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was released by the information centre in Accra in 11 local languages, and by the information centre in Dhaka in Bangla. The information centre in Lisbon issued a Portuguese-language manual for primary and high school teaching on human rights. Basic Facts about the United Nations was translated into Bangla during 1995 by the information centre in Dhaka and into Sinhalese and Tamil by the information centre in Colombo. In addition, the information centre in Moscow translated parts of the Blue Books into Russian and issued them as "mini Blue Books", and the information centre in Brussels translated What's the United Nations?, the popular DPI booklet for students, into Dutch.

20. The information centres continued to cooperate with the United Nations system partners throughout the year. In many countries, special publications featuring the work of the United Nations programmes and agencies in the host countries were prepared and issued in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary. Thematic international days continued to be observed, with centres collaborating with the United Nations system partners concerned in generating media coverage, organizing press conferences or other special events, including the launching of annual reports, such as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) State of World Population Report, the UNDP Human Development Report and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) World Investment Report.

21. As in the past, information centres provided logistical assistance to the United Nations Secretariat offices and system partners, arranging for press conferences and media contacts for senior officials visiting the duty station, serving as the focal point in public information campaigns where the United Nations system partner had no local office or supervising examinations on behalf of the Secretariat.

22. The growing attention given by the media to the United Nations, most recently in connection with the fiftieth anniversary, certain peace-keeping operations and the Organization's financial crisis, has been accompanied by increased activity by many centres aimed at providing or, as necessary, correcting information, as well as introducing in local media and with opinion makers a global perspective on events being reported or analysed.

23. A large number of information centres continued to fax to the Department's News Distribution Section, daily or as warranted, locally originated articles, editorials and commentaries on the United Nations, and on priority issues of interest to the Organization and the international community. On occasion, information centres compiled press clippings of specific interest at the request of substantive departments. Timely press feedback from around the world contributed to the Organization's ability to remain abreast of the prevailing public opinion and perception of its work.

24. Fully utilizing their local know-how and their network of media and other contacts, information centres provided effective information and logistical assistance to the Secretary-General on his official visits to Member States. Detailed arrangements were made in cooperation with the host Governments to generate maximum media coverage of the visits, and the information centres in cities visited performed media relations tasks on behalf of the Secretary-General.

25. Many information centres continue to play an active role in promoting the dissemination or sales of United Nations publications, notably the Blue Books Series, showcasing the Organization's involvement in major areas of international concern. Many centres participated in international book fairs held in the host countries, displaying the wide range of publications produced by the Department and its partners within the United Nations system.

III. INTEGRATION OF FIELD OFFICES

26. In keeping with the request of the General Assembly, every effort has been made by the Secretary-General, through the Department of Public Information, to facilitate the process of integrating United Nations information centres with UNDP field offices whenever feasible, on a case-by-case basis, and taking into account the views of the host country. The objective of integration remains to ensure a unified image of the United Nations in the field, to enhance information activities in all areas, including development issues, and to achieve possible economies through the sharing of common services. Integration can lead to efficiency gains not just by the sharing of common premises or office equipment, but by staff adopting a common goal and a broader perspective for a coordinated, integrated programme for information activities in the field.

The observance of the fiftieth anniversary served as a catalyst in pulling together the various agencies and elements of the United Nations in the field, enabling a team effort in which the United Nations system as a whole was the beneficiary.

27. At the present time, 15 information centres are fully integrated with UNDP offices in the field. In addition, another 15 information centres currently operate under the immediate supervision of UNDP resident representatives. All information centres carry out their mandates with regular programmatic and administrative guidance from the Information Centres Service of the Department of Public Information.

28. The Administrator of UNDP and the Assistant Secretary-General for Public Information are both committed to strengthening the integrated centres. This cooperation has led to a better understanding of each other's mandates and a closer working relationship at the country level. To deal with practical matters, efforts are under way to establish a consultative mechanism at Headquarters to better respond to or avert problems that may arise in the field, and to have an open line of communication in order to enhance the performance of the integrated centres. To this end, a UNDP/DPI Working Group began meeting monthly in February 1996.

IV. STRENGTHENING OF THE UNITED NATIONS INFORMATION CENTRES

29. Special attention has been paid to enhancing the effectiveness of the information centres, including through several new key appointments. In the past year, new directors were appointed to the information centres in London, Moscow, New Delhi, Tokyo and Washington. In early 1996, a senior information officer was appointed to head the new United Nations information office in Pretoria. Also, in March of the same year, a director was appointed for the United Nations information centre in Bonn. Further conversion of Information Assistants to the National Information Officer category has been accomplished, with a total of 35 such posts having been converted since the beginning of this exercise.

30. During the past year, the Department of Public Information continued to enhance the effectiveness of its branch offices by organizing special briefing programmes at Headquarters for selected local staff and encouraging computer training locally. A weeklong briefing programme was held at Headquarters for information officers (March 1995) and for reference assistants (June 1995) selected from all regions on the basis of training needs. The briefing programme for reference assistants included, for the first time, extensive hands-on training in electronic information retrieval and storage. A similar programme for administrative assistants had been planned for the latter part of 1995, but had to be postponed indefinitely owing to the introduction in September 1995 of special measures related to the current financial situation.

31. Mindful of the importance of training, the Department is also in the process of updating the Information Centres Manual, which contains policy guidelines and practical instructions for programme activities. Last revised in early 1992, it is expected that the 1996 edition, reflecting the many changes of

recent years, will assist the information centres in achieving maximum levels of efficiency.

32. The task of monitoring and evaluating information centres' activities has also received much attention during the year. All major activities reported by information centres were entered into a computerized data bank, according to thematic category and type of activity. To further enhance the feedback mechanism, the Department undertook in early 1996 a review of the way information centres report to Headquarters, with a view to establishing a systematic way of assessing and documenting activities undertaken by them.

33. As at the end of 1995, 37 information centres and 7 United Nations offices received information through electronic means: cc:mail, cc:mail to Internet, cc:mail to Higgins and Wang E-mail. This facility helped these offices to have available timely information materials such as the messages and statements of the Secretary-General, selected DPI press releases, Security Council resolutions and reports, the Daily Highlights and other United Nations materials of immediate public interest. As part of its effort to assist the information centres in integrating existing applications and increasing efficiency, the Department has distributed 65 Packard Bell Pentiums equipped with CD-ROM drives and special software, which were purchased before the introduction of the special measures relating to the financial situation of the United Nations. Currently, 29 information centres receive information materials by fax. For greater efficiency and cost-effectiveness, the Department intends to switch every information centre to the electronic mail mode of transmission as appropriate technology becomes available.

34. In keeping with the advancing communications technology which is changing the way the information reaches the users, many information centres strengthened, or launched, electronic information dissemination services to local audiences. News on the United Nations is made available by the information centre in Lisbon in English and Portuguese on the Internet, and by the information centre in Mexico City on the World Wide Web site in Spanish. The United Nations Office in Ukraine also launched its own Web site. The information centre in Rome posts United Nations information on Agora, a multilingual international network. Information centres such as those in Lisbon, Mexico City and Sydney continue to post on the Internet much sought-after information such as the text of declarations adopted at major United Nations conferences in addition to press releases and other important documents. User feedback indicates a high level of satisfaction.

35. With prospects for additional financial resources from the United Nations budget extremely unlikely, efforts to strengthen the information centres now must rely heavily on the ingenuity, creativity and perseverance of the staff, and on intensifying collaboration with United Nations agencies as well as other partners in the field. As recommended by the General Assembly, the information centres continued to work very closely with system partners in the field, including UNDP, UNFPA, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UNICEF, the World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organization (WHO), in the planning, implementation and funding of joint information programmes. The commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Organization gave added impetus to such collaboration.

V. FINANCIAL RESOURCES

36. The operational funds made available to the Department of Public Information for disbursement to the United Nations information centres are intended primarily for their maintenance and upkeep. Some funds are provided for local translation and printing of information material, as well as for travel within the areas serviced by the information centre.

37. During the past year, the critical financial situation of the Organization affected decision-making and programme planning at all levels, including the information centres. The special measures related to the financial situation of the Organization, introduced in September 1995, severely restricted travel. This hampered the ability of many centre directors to adequately service the host country, let alone other countries or regions served by the respective office. The freeze on the purchase of equipment, including computer equipment, has also slowed progress towards modernizing the centres' communication capabilities. As field offices of very modest size, the information centres are particularly vulnerable in the light of the current suspension of all action related to recruitment. If vacancies occur, it is impossible for the smaller centres to maintain the same level of activities if key positions remain unfilled.

38. Extrabudgetary funding in the form of government contributions in cash or in kind for the information centres continued to decline during 1995. In the current financial situation, it will be very difficult for the Department to maintain the level of operation of certain information centres where contributions have not been forthcoming in accordance with agreements with the host country.

39. However, it must be pointed out that the financial support provided by several host Governments has been invaluable to the operation of information centres. Likewise, the provision of rent-free premises, currently provided by 32 Member States hosting United Nations information centres, is greatly appreciated. A breakdown of host Government support for 1995 for the 62 information centres that are currently operational is contained in the annex to the present report.

Annex

ALLOCATION OF RESOURCES FOR RENTAL OF PREMISES AND HOST GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE

Centre	Established	Department of Public Information posts	Rental of premises in 1995 ($)	Host Government support	
				Extrabudgetary staff	Cash contribution received for 1995 ($)
Accra	March 1958	P-4, 5 local staff	Rent-free		
Algiers a/	September 1963	4 local staff	Rent-free		
Ankara a/	March 1975	2 local staff	6 700		
Antananarivo a/	January 1963	2 local staff	10 000		
Asunción a/	October 1962	2 local staff	7 233		
Athens	April 1954	P-5, 5 local staff	53 712		52 097
Beirut	September 1962	5 local staff	23 000		
Bonn	1995	D-1, 3 local staff	Rent-free		
Brazzaville	June 1983	5 local staff	Rent-free		
Brussels	January 1975	5 local staff	70 361		68 750
Bucharest a/	June 1970	1 local staff	Rent-free	5 local staff	3 080
Buenos Aires	November 1948	P-4, 5 local staff	Rent-free		70 140
Bujumbura	June 1961	4 local staff	Rent-free		Not received since 1992
Cairo a/	April 1949	5 local staff	240		234
Colombo a/	August 1961	4 local staff	Rent-free		612
Copenhagen	December 1946	P-5, 6 local staff	34 612		46 678
Dakar	April 1964	P-5, 4 local staff	Rent-free		
Dar es Salaam	June 1961	4 local staff	Rent-free		
Dhaka	August 1981	4 local staff	7 000		3 000
Harare	November 1982	P-5, 5 local staff	Rent-free		
Islamabad	March 1951	P-4, 5 local staff	10 000		6 500
Jakarta	August 1985	P-5, 4 local staff	Rent-free		
Kabul b/	October 1959		2 400		
Kathmandu a/	April 1964	3 local staff	4 000		Not received since 1993

Centre	Established	Department of Public Information posts	Rental of premises in 1995 ($)	Host Government support	
				Extrabudgetary staff	Cash contribution received for 1995 ($)
Khartoum	October 1963	4 local staff	Rent-free		
Kinshasa a/	July 1964	5 local staff	800		
Lagos	May 1967	P-4, 5 local staff	Rent-free	2 local staff	Not received for 1995
La Paz a/	September 1963	3 local staff	7 708		Not received for 1995
Lima	April 1960	5 local staff	25 300		
Lisbon	November 1977	P-4, 3 local staff	Rent-free	2 local staff	120 000
Lomé a/	May 1962	4 local staff	Rent-free		
London	January 1947	D-1, 7 local staff	135 000		
Lusaka	October 1975	4 local staff	Rent-free		
Madrid	May 1986	P-5, 4 local staff	Rent-free		41 699
Managua a/	July 1984		Rent-free	3 local staff	Not received for 1995
Manama	November 1977		Rent-free	3 local staff	33 000 from Government of Bahrain
Manila	August 1953	D-1, 4 local staff	Rent-free		
Maseru a/	February 1979	3 local staff	Rent-free		
Mexico City c/	August 1947	P-5, 6 local staff	91 230		2 290
Monrovia b/	October 1950				
Moscow	April 1948	P-5, 6 local staff	20 116		
Nairobi	August 1974	4 local staff	Rent-free		
New Delhi	January 1947	D-1, 5 local staff	45 000		
Ouagadougou	April 1982	P-4, 5 local staff	Rent-free		
Panama City a/	September 1984	2 local staff	Rent-free	Services of 3 local staff	
Paris	March 1947	D-1, P-3, 8 local staff	Rent-free		5 524
Port of Spain	January 1962	P-4, 5 local staff	27 490		2 080 d/, 592 e/
Prague	December 1947	P-4, 4 local staff	200		26 785

Centre	Established	Department of Public Information posts	Rental of premises in 1995 ($)	Host Government support	
				Extrabudgetary staff	Cash contribution received for 1995 ($)
Pretoria	1996	P-5, 3 local staff	Rent-free		
Rabat	December 1962	5 local staff	20 000		Not received since 1993
Rio de Janeiro	March 1947	P-5, 6 local staff	Rent-free		Not received since 1992
Rome	July 1958	D-1, 5 local staff	450		
Sana'a	April 1994	P-3, 2 local staff			
San Salvador b/	July 1960				
Santa Fé de Bogotá	May 1954	5 local staff	55 649		70 000
Sydney	November 1948	P-3, 5 local staff	54 000		
Tehran	May 1950	P-4, 2 local staff	21 000		
Tokyo	April 1958	1 D-1, 7 local staff	275 000		100 000 for public information activities
Tripoli	January 1980		Rent-free	5 local staff	Not received since 1993
Tunis	May 1960	P-5, 4 local staff	Rent-free		
Warsaw	August 1995		Rent-free	3 local staff to be appointed	
Washington	October 1946	D-1, P-4, 6 local staff	91 567		
Windhoek	October 1992	P-5, 4 local staff	75		
Yangon a/	June 1959	4 local staff	8 600		
Yaoundé	October 1965	P-4, 5 local staff	Rent free	2 local staff	Not received since 1990

a/ Integrated centres.

b/ Not operational.

c/ The Government of Mexico provided in 1995 a contribution equivalent to $31,756 to be divided among United Nations offices sharing premises.

d/ Contributed by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago.

e/ Contributed by the Government of Barbados.